



Episode 53: The Power of Your Network When Searching for a Job

Elizabeth ([01:18](#)):

Hi Hillary, welcome to the Women in Product podcast. It's great to have you here today.

Hillary ([01:36](#)):

Thank you so much for having me. I appreciate it. Glad to talk.

Elizabeth ([01:40](#)):

Yeah, I think I should start by saying congratulations on your new job at Kickstarter.

Hillary ([01:46](#)):

Thank you very much. It's been a few months and still learning, but been a really great experience so far.

Elizabeth ([01:53](#)):

That's awesome. Currently it's really quite a tough job market. I'm sure you're very in touch with that. So tell me a little bit about how you found and then landed your current role.

Hillary ([02:12](#)):

Absolutely, so definitely that resonates with me. For my current role, it took about three months between when I first applied to the position and when I started day one, so about late January to mid-April. I'm not sure if this is a universal experience right now, but it definitely has felt like the kind of application to decision funnel has been a lot longer than what I've experienced in the past and anecdotally from friends and colleagues, it seems like that's the case. Just the sheer volume of applicants you're kind competing with can be really overwhelming. But yeah, so I left my last role by choice. I left, I was in the ed tech space and I left in August of 2022. I really wanted to take a little bit of a sabbatical and spend some time traveling, which was really wonderful. I'm glad I did it.

Hillary ([03:13](#)):

So I took a few months off and then started looking for my new role at the beginning of 2023, and like I said, it took about three to four months the whole job search process until I landed this role. But yeah, I think sometimes it's just I don't want to downplay my own growth, but I do think sometimes there's a big element of luck and timing for this current role. I did see that a close friend from high school who's not in the product space whatsoever, he's in the community support space, customer support space. I recently started at Kickstarter and he posted a product opening on LinkedIn and I just immediately messaged him and he said, I wouldn't



even have thought to reach out to you. I don't know that I knew that you were in the product space today. So that was a little bit of luck and timing and he was able to get me sort of a foot in the door with an interview and kind of take it from there. So a little bit of searching, a little bit longer time that I had wanted to spend searching for the right fit, but the way that it worked out was just a contact from my life who worked at a company that had a relevant opening, so it really, really worked out.

Elizabeth ([04:36](#)):

Now when you reached out to him, is he like somebody that, well, people often talk about when you network there's tight or close connections and then there's looser or lighter connections. So where did he fall in that range for you?

Hillary ([04:57](#)):

He was a really close friend who we kind of reconnected in this job after not seeing each other for some time, but I would say pretty close on the spectrum of friendship and closeness level. But I have also had a few interactions where I was looking for a role or the other person was looking for a role in the past couple of years where it was someone from high school, French class that I had a great connection with back in my teens that I haven't spoken to since, and kind saw that as a blessing and an opportunity to reconnect or form new friendships. So I've definitely been on both ends of the spectrum there and I think either end is okay. I think supporting people in your network and in your community, I try to have an open mind about that and not make any judgements. If it is someone who that you haven't spoken with in a really long time who's a very loose connection and clearly just wants to try to get a referral to a role, I think I try to go into that with an open mind.

Elizabeth ([06:06](#)):

Yeah, it's interesting that when you did reach out to him, he said, oh, never. I didn't even know you were working in product. I wouldn't have thought of you that way. And yet that connection still proved valuable to you once you took that step to reach out and say, Hey, hi, I'm interested in that, that you did immediately get a response from him and had that connection.

Hillary ([06:33](#)):

Absolutely.

Elizabeth ([06:34](#)):

Yeah,

Hillary ([06:35](#)):

Absolutely. I think it's such a small world. Even when I was initially thinking of who to reach out to when I was starting my job search for this time around, obviously the people who work directly in your role or the people who come top of mind first, and I



often kind of forget to expand my thinking beyond that, but it is very true. There are so many kind of adjacent roles in the product space. You're such a hub as a product manager to other roles at an organization, and so that's a great, I hadn't thought of that, but that is a great piece of advice to expand your net when you're looking for a role beyond just the people working directly in your field. You just never know what connection that might lead to or who has an opening at the right time.

Elizabeth ([07:27](#)):

Yeah, absolutely. And I think it's interesting because we do think of our professional network as a very specific thing, and yet the thing is that when you're job searching, it's those human connections that make the difference. They don't always get you in for an interview, but if you can talk to a person, it always seems like you're more likely to get in for an interview or at least get some feedback of some type. Right,

Hillary ([07:59](#)):

Definitely. And I think, yeah, that was one thing that I kind of noted down and thinking ahead to this conversation was something that I feel has served me and people I know really well is just trying to be yourself in every situation, even if it's a professional or networking situation, just to really be yourself, come to the table with you as you are, be a human and try to form human connections first. To your point, it's not always going to lead to a job or to a really great professional opportunity, but there are so many connections you can make outside of that that could be valuable to your life or could lead to a job opportunity later down the line. But I agree, I think I always feel a bit better and a bit more confident in the interview process when you get to that stage where you can actually speak to somebody. I'm sure a lot of people feel that.

Elizabeth ([08:59](#)):

Yeah. So in your pursuit of a job, in your job search overall, did you tend to focus on networking or what was kind of the full range of things that you did? Obviously the networking or having that connection at least gave you an entree into the job that you ended up getting, but kind of describe the full range of what you did when you started searching.

Hillary ([09:28](#)):

Yeah, I mean I tried everything. I think running the full gamut of, I tried to be intentional because I knew that my current role was coming to an end because I was leaving of my own accord. I did try to plant seeds a bit earlier on than the moment when I started my job search. So one thing that I did, which happy to talk more about this later, but is I volunteer for a professional organization called Boston Product Management Association or B P M A, and that has opened so many doors in terms of networking and connection, which is wonderful. I remember specifically being at a network event a few months before I left my last job and to this point of being human and just forming human connections, I was chatting with a few people



who were both on the board with me, but also just attendees at the event that I had seen a few times at a few different networking events that we hosted and kind of started talking about this desire to travel and leave my current role and start off on a new opportunity.

Hillary ([10:41](#)):

And I remember talking to the people at that event in that small circle and hearing a lot of positive reinforcement and people sharing their stories of times that they did that before kids or when I was younger or a couple of years ago, I took a pause in my career and decided to travel too, and it was just such a good experience and so that conversation I remember was really a great catapult for me and it kind of confirmed my suspicion that I could do that. And so that was a great motivator and a great time where forming those human connections really helped to propel me towards a decision and I also stayed involved with that organization during the time that I took that sabbatical. So that was a great way where it was really a minimal commitment on my end just a few hours a month, but it allowed me to stay connected to that network of people and to my local community of product professionals, and it allowed me to plant seeds for, Hey, I'm going to be taking this trip and then I think early in the new year I'm going to be coming back and starting my job search keep me in mind.

Hillary ([11:56](#)):

So I did try to plant seeds early on in a few different places before I knew that I needed to rely on those connections. So I tried that. I definitely tried blind applying to a lot of roles. I wish that I had kept a spreadsheet I did not, just to be able to tell you how many I applied to, but a lot of looking on LinkedIn and applying there to any product manager, senior product manager role that looked like something I'd be interested in. I'll say those were not the most fruitful. I'm sure a lot of people feel this pain, but so many, there was a feature on LinkedIn and I'm sure on other platforms too where you can see how many people applied to the same role as you're applying. That number has grown pretty dramatically since the last time I was looking for a role.

Hillary ([12:48](#)):

So it can be pretty discouraging to find something that looks like a good fit and then see that there are already 2000 applicants who have already applied. So needless to say, I think the blind application process, I don't know that I would not do that next time around, but I don't know that I would do it as much as I did. I think a lot of that ended up being a waste of time for me because the interviews I ended up getting the calls back tended to be more likely than not from jobs I applied to where I had some sort of a connection at the company unfortunately. So again, I know that can be frustrated because people apply, you see a role that seems like a good fit that you're qualified for and you send your LinkedIn or your resume out into the abyss



and you never hear back, or you just get an automated rejection months later, and that can be super frustrating and defeating.

Hillary ([13:50](#)):

But I think learning experience for me, I think next time I would stick to what ended up working, which was really leaning into my network and just either reaching out to product people in my network who worked at companies that I was interested in. For me that was either the education space, social media, some of the big companies like Google or Meta, if I happened to be interested in that. And then sort of local either nonprofit companies or companies with some sort of mission-driven work that happened. I was less interested in FinTech, less interested in healthcare and don't have that background. So I would kind of target companies that I knew I was interested in and would feel good about working for and either see if there was a product person I could speak to there who would respond to my LinkedIn message or I would reach out directly to connections I already had on the product field and see if there were any leads on open roles there. That was sort of the strategy. So I tried everything and that was the strategy that seemed to work the best for me.

Elizabeth ([14:58](#)):

Yeah, I mean you have a great point here, and I hear this from a lot of people that there's so many different approaches that you can take and you kind of can't even do them all. So it really becomes where do you best spend your time? And I think I've heard this story from a number of other people as well, anecdotal data, but just the idea of having some focus to your search, looking for the connections at companies that you're interested in some way that seem appropriate for you, pursuing those and getting to know people that making those kinds of connections really, really benefits you in your search. It won't always pay off, but it's more likely to.

Hillary ([15:50](#)):

Definitely, and I think to your earlier point, often the deeper connections or the connections where you've worked directly to someone who can speak to your experience or at least demeanor as a professional and your trustworthiness are the ones that will better lead to real opportunities. There may be some people who you have a really light connection with who can at least, maybe the most you can ask of them to do is to introduce you to someone on the product team there at the company that they work for that can still be really beneficial and can spark a great conversation and connection. I think part of it is just being aware of who you're asking and what you're asking of them, and I do think it's important to kind of come to that conversation and come to the table with a very specific ask. I'm sure you've encountered this as well, but sometimes you'll have people reach out wanting to talk about product work, and I love having those conversations and I'm sure other people love having those conversations.

Hillary ([16:58](#)):

It's so much more fruitful of a conversation when someone comes and says, I'm just interested in exploring the PM role, and I'd love to hear about your experience, or I'm interested specifically in Kickstarter and I know they have an opening. I'm going to apply to this role and would love to know what your experience has been like and if you can maybe drop put in a good word for me. It can be hard when you just ask for an informal conversation and you're really wanting a referral or you're really wanting to be connected to someone in the product space, but you don't come asking that ask specifically. I think that can be hard.

Elizabeth ([17:36](#)):

I think you're That's a really good point. I have people fairly frequently who want to talk to me and I'll give them time, but they're unclear on what they're asking and it's like, well, I'm happy to help you, but help me help you. Don't make me guess what you're wanting here. Sometimes it's just a lot more efficient to ask for what you want and maybe a little teeny bit of background about why you want that, et cetera, but I find that the vast majority of people are willing to help other people just don't just be respectful of their time in doing that. You think you're being better behaved by not asking them right away, but actually maybe not, right? Maybe it's better if you're just a little bit more direct about what you're looking for.

Hillary ([18:28](#)):

I think that's exactly right. I hadn't thought about that, but you're right. I think sometimes even myself, you're afraid to ask directly for what you're looking for or what you want out of a conversation, but yeah, it's almost like the networking equivalent of this meeting could have been an email. If you're just asking for some basic resources or to learn a little bit about the company that they work for, they can probably send you that asynchronously and you can feel better knowing that you didn't waste their time in that case.

Elizabeth ([19:01](#)):

Yeah, definitely. So as you move forward, what do you think you'll maybe do differently or sort of double down on when it comes to building out your network?

Hillary ([19:18](#)):

That's a good question. Like I said, I think I would steer clear from these kind of blind application strategy that didn't really benefit me. I think over time it's been, let's see, three, this is my third company that I've worked in a PM role at, so I've gone through essentially three cycles of the product interview. I think preparedness for that. I mean, I know this particular conversation is around networking, but I feel like getting a great connection through your network is just sort of the first step in succeeding in the job search. And sometimes we kind of think that if I were just to get this connection at that great company that I want to work for, I'm interested in, I'll be good. And from there, as soon as I have an interview, smooth sailing, I know what I'm



doing. Even if you've been in the product space for a while, I'm sort of mid-career, so this is my, I think seventh year in a PM role.

Hillary ([20:30](#)):

I still really needed to sit down and spend some time preparing for the product interview. So preparing for things like case studies, if you're given one ahead of time, really sitting down and putting some thought into it, if you're not given one told about one ahead of time, expecting that there will be one and sort of having some back pocket structures or frameworks to draw upon as you go into that. The last role that I left at a company called Cengage, which is in the EdTech space. In that role, I was most recently working in their English language teaching department. So my customers were English language teachers who are located all around the world, so did lots of really cool customer interviews with them, and I learned how to apply the jobs to be done framework to that research initiative, which was at times grueling and a really challenging learning experience.

Hillary ([21:34](#)):

But I was so glad that I did it because leaving that role in addition to just growing as a pm, that was a great framework that I felt like I spent so much time learning and becoming familiar with that I made sure to mention it and try to apply it in any interview that I had. That was one that I used in my interview with Kickstarter and several other interviews that I had with other companies. So I think definitely kind of getting organized and prepared, I would do that again and I would really try to hone in on and practice those skills of having sort of a back pocket set of frameworks and tools to draw from and examples. I know people say this all the time, but I think at a certain point sometime in your career you get confident enough in how you've been performing and succeeding as a product manager that you think there are certain things that you can wing it with in an interview.

Hillary ([22:38](#)):

And I think maybe it's my personality, but I think that's not the best idea and I think it's always better to come over prepared. And I don't think I did that perfectly or great in this last round of interviews, but I do think where I did do it well, it did help me in moving on to the next stage. And it was something that if there's ever a framework or a tool that you can mention in an interview that is unique enough that not every single product manager is going to have used it. So the jobs to be done framework that we used in Cengage's E L T department, I think we were the only team to have applied it at Cengage at that time, and I had never worked with another product manager or product team that had used it. So it was unique to me, it was new to me, and I thought that it must be valuable and somewhat unique to a hiring manager, a director that I talk to. So if you can show not only in answering the interview questions well and in a prepared way, but also that you can bring some extra value to the team or teach the team a tool or a strategy that you've used before, I think that's a step above and beyond just being prepared for the interview.

Elizabeth ([23:53](#)):

Yeah. The other thing that I always say to people is it's one thing to study, but you're going to have to say your answers out loud. So to the extent that you can practice saying the answers out loud, it really helps because then you don't, it's just there. You don't stumble over any words or you really prepared to say it on the fly and you have it sort of tucked in your brain. So that would be my little cherry on the top of what you said, but being prepared is super important, I think especially in this extremely competitive job market that we're in, right? People, they want to have a real assessment of what and what's special about you and why you're really the right person for them.

Hillary ([24:44](#)):

Definitely. And I love the idea of practicing. I mean, nobody feels comfortable standing in front of a mirror and practicing your pitch. It's definitely not my style, but I think if you have someone in your life, a good friend or a partner or a sibling or a colleague you're close with who will just sit down with you and let you kind of talk it out or explain the example you're planning on using in an interview in a way that's easy for someone to understand, even that alone could be helpful practice.

Elizabeth ([25:17](#)):

Yeah, exactly. Exactly. I think there's probably people out there listening to this who are going to say, maintaining your network, it's a big job. I got a job. I don't need a second job. How do I do that? Any tips for those people going forward? Anything you're thinking about in terms of, Hey, how do I expand or maintain my network, my professional network? So the next go round, it's there for me.

Hillary ([25:50](#)):

Definitely. Something I've been thinking about more and more recently is as part of the work I've been doing with B P M A, the professional development organization that's local to Boston is trying to find ways to stay involved in your community or your network as much as possible over time without burning yourself out. I think again, certain endeavors that we take on outside of work can probably quickly become a second job, and I think it's hard to balance work in life and pushing yourself too far in really being connected to a network can sometimes become overwhelming, but as much as you can, I think trying to stay involved is really helpful.

Hillary ([27:02](#)):

I found that always trying to offer something to your network, even if it's just your LinkedIn community is great too. It's a great way to maintain those relationships over time and make sure that you are adding value for the people in your community as well. So even if it's just reposting a job posting so that people in your network are aware of it and can maybe take that opportunity or posting things like events or



learning resources like articles or books or podcasts or sharing learnings. So just occasionally at least offering something to your network

Hillary ([28:07](#)):

That they can take advantage of. Because I do think, to your point, and I felt this as well, it can be really hard to feel like I need to constantly be maintaining really strong deep connections in my network with as many people as possible. It's just not feasible. We all have full-time jobs, people have families, people have second jobs. People want to live their lives outside of their professional identity.-I think it's okay to accept that there are going to be times that you reach out to someone who isn't your strongest connection, who maybe you have the risk of or the fear of them feeling like you're just reaching out to them to get something out of them. As long as you're being honest and human and upfront about it, I think it's okay. I think it happens to everybody.

Hillary ([29:01](#)):

So relieving yourself of that pressure to maintain so many deep, strong connections across your network, I think that's really okay, but as long as you're feeling good about, Hey, I'm offering something to my network, whether it's volunteering with an organization, whether it's participating in virtual events where you can meet other people and connect them, just being that person to say, I thought of you. I know you're interested in X, Y, or Z, I saw this opening and sharing a link to a job posting, checking in on colleagues from past roles and just seeing how their careers are going or if they need anything. I just don't think it's feasible to put that much pressure on yourself to really be going above and beyond. We're all human, and I think as long as you feel like outside of your day-to-day job, you're doing something to provide a resource for or connect people in your network, I think

Elizabeth ([30:07](#)):

I think those are great suggestions. I mean, I think you're spot on to say, don't put so much pressure on yourself to do something that's not possible to do, and use some leverage to try and keep those connections there in some way, shape, or form. I also think that a lot of us are happy to help others, but we assume that other people aren't happy to help us. And so when you talk about reaching out to people who are loose connections, I agree with you. If you're just upfront about, Hey, we met X, Y, Z, but I'm really interested in this, could you connect me to the right person or something? Most of the time people are willing to do that. Sometimes people say no, but I would say nine times out of 10 people say yes. And I think being part of that goodness, that virtuous cycle is also something all of us can keep in mind, right?

Hillary ([31:07](#)):

Yeah, pay it forward for sure. And I think, again, as long as you're honest and honest with yourself about what you're looking for, it's okay. I wouldn't reach out to someone



I barely know to ask for a formal referral. They can't speak to what I've done. They can't speak to who I am as a product manager. So just being direct about, Hey, I know you might not want to recommend me for the role, but if you could put me in touch with the hiring manager or if you could drop a link to my LinkedIn to them and just ask them to check it out if they're interested, I would greatly appreciate it. So just being realistic about that is important too.

Elizabeth ([31:48](#)):

Yeah. Anyway, congratulations on your new job, and thanks for taking the time to talk to us. I know that there are plenty of people out there that are still searching for that just right job for them, and hopefully some of your advice will benefit them. So thank you. Thanks for taking. Thanks so

Hillary ([32:07](#)):

Much, Elizabeth. I really appreciate your time.